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Involvement of institutions and local communities in turtles and cetacean monitoring and conservation in Maltese waters through networking

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The loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*) and the bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) are regularly found around Maltese waters, especially the former. However, until recently, information on the populations and conservation status of both species in the area was lacking. The EU LIFE+ project MIGRATE (LIFE11 NAT/MT/1070) was carried out to address these information gaps by aiming to obtain more biotic data on these species and to identify areas essential for the life cycle and reproduction of these protected species in Maltese waters.

To achieve these aims, amongst others, a citizen science approach was chosen, with the involvement of a number of institutes like the Maritime Squadron of the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM) and that of the Civil Protection Department (CPD) as well as local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other sea-user communities such as divers.

A training scheme was developed and implemented for the above mentioned stakeholders in order to train them in species identification. During such training, skills on the identification of all cetacean and marine turtle species recorded in Maltese waters and knowledge about what to do in case of sightings or encounters with such injured animals was provided. Over two years (2013-2014), nine training sessions (each lasting around five hours) were dedicated to AFM and CPD officials. Eleven additional sessions were carried out with different diving clubs, NGOs, interested members of the public and other sea-users. Over 110 AFM & CPD officials were trained together with about 200 people from the public, NGOs and other stakeholders. The resulting network has been proven to work effectively with a substantial increase in the amount

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of data being gathered in recent years. Moreover, due to the training provided, more accurate data of higher quality was gathered and the profile of sea turtles and marine mammals in Maltese waters was raised, underlining the effectiveness of such a citizen science based network.